

# HOW TO USE ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS IN EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF ALUMNI FROM THE 1960S\*

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## Abstract

As an educational leadership department chair or college of education dean you are increasingly facing the need to cut budgets and try to develop funds to keep your academic programs afloat. The use of oral history with your education alumni can serve as a way to bridge and remind both the institution and the former graduates of the value the institution gave and still gives to their professional and personal lives. A case study was done using oral histories from college of education graduates during 1960-1969 taken over the period August, 2008- May, 2009. This paper contains information on oral history research and the methodology used in the Arizona State College/Northern Arizona University (ASC/NAU) Oral History Project. The paper then proceeds to discuss the processes used in displaying the information obtained from the oral history interviews, advice on how to use such recordings to promote alumni involvement, and some preliminary results on the findings from the study of the interviews.



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## 1 How to Use Oral History Projects to Get in Touch With Your Alumni ?

The headlines in newspapers and college web sites today all carry the same message, “do more with less.” As a department chair or college of education dean you are increasingly facing the need to cut budgets and

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to develop funds to keep your academic programs afloat. The use of oral history with your education alumni can serve as a way to bridge and remind both the institution and the former graduates of the value the institution gave and still gives to their professional and personal lives. For many alumni the opportunity to relive those memories is a cherished opportunity for them, can serve to enrich the history of the institution, and can inspire alumni to give back to today's youth. The struggle that alumni causes face today is that every alum is being asked to give more to multiple causes. Why then should they feel that special connection to your campus that will motivate them to do more for their college when they graduated forty or more years ago? One method of motivation is to bring those memories flooding back to them and renew the ties to the campus and their fellow graduates.

A tool used in my higher education leadership classes that does bring back those memories and allows alumni to renew their connections with their fellow graduates and the campus is Oral History. Recording a graduate's oral history and archiving it in a social networking site allows graduates to access their own memories and the memories of other graduates. Contacting the alumni and telling them that you value their memories of the time period in which they graduated does bring forth enthusiasm and a fresh approach to contacting people.

The author, like numerous others, attended college during the 1960's. Although every student who goes through this experience has a story, every story about the experience is different. It is the collective story of all students who were college age during this time that this paper seeks to discover, as well as how to use that story to create a community of alumni from Arizona State College/Northern Arizona University graduates of the college of education during the years 1960-1969. Even in a small, homogeneous community that was college life in Flagstaff, Arizona during the 60's there were thousands of different stories and different views of what life at ASC/NAU was like.

Every person is the star of his or her own personal history, and from the reaction to this project, each appears eager to share that history with posterity. Some of their stories are poignant, compelling, and humorous, and some are just improbable. Seen across the chasm of years, some of the stories jar you with the prejudice and discrimination that was life in this decade, while others inspire you with tales of the special humanity of faculty and students that years cannot diminish.

These NAU tales include: The "Spider Man of Taylor Hall." He had arms and legs long enough and physical strength enough that he could stretch out his arms and legs and "wall crawl" up the narrow halls of Taylor Hall and lie in wait to scare unsuspecting victims of his humor. There are tales of discrimination against the women of the 60's who were locked up in dormitories at night after 9:00 p.m. and disciplined ("campused") if they failed to be in their rooms. The tales include the powerful stories about individual faculty who made a difference and a life-long lasting impression in students' lives. These tales include stories about: "Axers Alley," Saga Foods; The Chain Gang; Panty Raids; Punch Cards for enrolling in classes; Snow Sculptures; "Great Snow of '67;" Mum Girls; Splinter City; and, thousands of other vignettes of life during this time.

## 2 Oral History Research at Northern Arizona University

Cline Library at Northern Arizona University (N.A.U.) has an Oral History Collection called the Colorado Plateau Oral History collection. This collection includes collections of oral histories from Flagstaff, from Arizona State College, from various minority groups and a general collection. In addition, Cline library is an active member of several current on-going oral history projects including the Route 66 oral history project. Oral History collections have a long history at N.A.U. Most of the collections were done with tape recorders. The current methodology adopted by the Cline Library is that audio recordings must be done on a digital audio recorder. In addition, any oral history must include a digital photograph. Institutional Review Board (I.R.B.) approval was required for the project and both an individual project and a class project were approved.

### 3 Oral History Methodology for ASC/NAU Oral History Project

The Interview questions for the ASC/NAU Oral History Project were developed and field tested over the time period April-August, 2008. The original intent was to develop a dozen questions that could be answered in less than twenty minutes. These questions were mostly demographic in nature and included a general question to tell about the graduate's experience at ASC/NAU. These questions were then shared with a sample group of NAU graduates and faculty members. A great number of questions came back from the sample group suggesting additional areas of interest. During the summer months of 2008 a number of graduate students in Educational Leadership conducted a class project in oral history using these questions as a field test. The questions were focused in four areas: demographics; campus experience; impact of the college experience; and, open ended questions. These questions were then discussed by the students and, based on the experience of the students with the questions in their efforts at conducting oral history interviews, a final list was developed. See Appendix A.

This oral history project focused on graduates from the College of Education of Arizona State College/Northern Arizona University (ASC/NAU). The change in the name of the institution came in 1966. Those students that attended Arizona State College (ASC) during the years 1960-1966 actually graduated from Northern Arizona University (NAU) starting with the graduation class of 1966. Some of the graduates even expressed dismay and anger that their loyalty was to ASC but their diploma read NAU. The target audience was to be graduates of the college of education from 1960-1969. The first step in conducting this oral history project was gaining access to the list of graduates from the college of education. The director of the office of Alumni Relations produced a list of 1,267 graduates from the college of education during the time period 1960-1969. The list was heavily weighted toward the later years in the decade since the institution went from a school of approximately 2,500 students in 1960 to an institution of approximately 9,000 students in 1969. Each of these graduates received a letter outlining the proposed research study and suggesting that, if they wished to be a part of this research study, they would need to send back an enclosed, stamped response card. Of the 1,200+ possible graduates 220 cards were returned. 170 agreed that they would like to be interviewed and provided information for how they could be contacted. Of the others, some merely said no, some explained their inability to participate as medical, and some were deceased and someone else sent the card back in their stead.

Of the 170 graduates who agreed to be interviewed the majority were from Arizona and California, however, twenty-three states of residence were listed from the 170 responses. Interestingly, the early graduates from the decade, 1960-1964, had a much greater percentage of out-of-state addresses. All of the individuals who responded positively received a response through e-mail or regular mail that they were to be a part of the study. See Appendix B.

It was an elaborate and difficult process to contact these individuals and set up interviews. Initial contact was usually made through e-mail, however, most of the graduates from the early 1960's did not list an e-mail address. After the initial contact, phone follow-up was usually necessary to establish a place to meet and a time to meet the graduates. The majority of the graduates chose to be interviewed in their homes. A few graduates asked for a neutral place such as a local country club, a hotel, or restaurant. Four major trips were scheduled for fall semester, 2008 in California, Show Low and Flagstaff, Tucson and Prescott and Flagstaff alone. The Tucson trip was cancelled when two of the three people to be interviewed had to reschedule. On these three remaining trips, twenty-one (21) people were interviewed and those interviews constitute the oral histories that are currently housed in WIKI web site. The face-to-face interviews ranged from forty minutes to two hours with the average being one hour. Following IRB protocol, after each interview a file was established that contained the oral interview on a CD, a written summary of the notes that were taken, copies of the three signed forms: An informed consent form, a deed of gift, and a model release that all participants had to sign, and a copy of the photo that was taken at the time of the interview and information about the location of each interview.

## 4 Archiving and Displaying the Interviews

The original intention of the oral history project was to place all interviews in the Cline Library Special Collections Colorado Plateau project. However, the problems inherent with placing audio recordings in the Cline Library special collection stem from the stringent requirements of the collection. Each recording had to have an accurate word-by-word transcription of the interview, not just a summary. Each recording had to be housed in a digital audio recording. The budget cuts from the '09 budget processes in Arizona resulted in cutting the one in-house transcription service. Once these problems were known, the campus e-learning department suggested a "Wiki" web site to display the work. This web sharing device appeared to solve several of the problems involved with digital audio information. First, it faithfully recorded the digital audio recordings and allowed access to all graduates of ASC/NAU. Second, it allowed individuals to make comments on the material without granting them editorial access to change the material. Finally, it included the notes that were taken from the audio recording as well as the photos.

## 5 Oral History Projects and Alumni Associations: How to use Oral History to communicate with graduates

So, how do you use this type of oral history as a communications device for Alumni? How do you use oral history interviews to get graduates communicating with each other and with the college? The first step is to find an instructor who is interested in oral history. Your institution's History Department should have at least one instructor who wants to get involved. There are several oral history organizations. The most useful group and web site for Arizona is the Southwest Oral History Association (SOHA) and the web site is [www.southwestoralhistory.org](http://www.southwestoralhistory.org)<sup>2</sup> A search of their membership or other oral history groups membership would inform you of anyone with such an interest. In addition, each of these oral history groups hold annual meetings where you can gain information about the type of projects out there and the people who are currently involved. There are also wonderful written documents available that outline how to do an oral history project. Northern Arizona University is a member of the Route 66 Oral History project and they produce a manual for conducting oral history interviews. There are several other good works on oral history that are in publication, including: Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A practical guide* (2003); Barbara Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan, *The Oral History Manual* (2002); and, Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History: A guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (2005).

Once you establish who wants to do oral history, then you can make it a part of the curriculum of an Arizona History Class or other history class. Oral history is the productive side of the study of history; it involves producing and writing about history as well as the receptive side of reading about it. Each instructor can usually gain access to the alumni records of graduates. Finding a source of funds for an initial mail-out is part of the process. The total costs for the mailings for the [ascnauoralhistoryproject.pbwiki.com](http://ascnauoralhistoryproject.pbwiki.com), including the cards to mail back, was under \$1,500. Mailing costs for this project were obtained from a mini-grant from the Dean of the College of Education. Costs for equipment and travel costs were reasonable and undertaken by the faculty member: A Sony digital audio recorder ran less than \$100. A good Kodak digital camera cost a little more than \$100. With these devices and mailing costs, you have access to a new way to communicate with alumni.

Of those alumni that initially responded to the letter, the majority responded favorably to the request to take part in the project. Even those who responded that they did not want to take part usually had something good to say about the concept. You can use the lists established for this project to contact alumni that are interested and want to get involved in other alumni functions.

If your institution establishes this type of sharing process then the participants will have access to all that you have collected and shared. They will be able to contact other alumni from that time period. A good WIKI site allows them to comment on the material, but not to make changes to the material. The end result of this type of sharing will be an open forum where alumni will have continual and open contact with each other and with your school. Although this project was just recently announced to the alumni involved, there

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.southwestoralhistory.org/>

have been several requests for e-mail addresses, street addresses and phone numbers of the alumni who were interviewed and who are the stars of their personal history and the history of ASC/NAU during the 1960's. Personal communications with alumni have provided anecdotal evidence that each alumni immediately goes to the information from the year they graduated and listen to those stories first. Several alumni called the instructor to gain access to past friends. It is important to establish ground rules concerning alumni contacting one another. In each case, a phone contact or e-mail has to be made before the information is shared.

## 6 Preliminary Results from the Oral Histories

Although the ASC/NAU oral history project has only reached about ten percent of the total interested alumni, some preliminary findings are emerging. First, one of the key research questions concerns which teachers and administrators they remember and why they remember them. This question is answered emphatically by the participants. They remember someone who made a difference in their lives. Often times the difference was made when they first arrived on campus by someone who cared enough to help them find housing, work, or to solve a problem that might have meant that they could not stay in school. This person is often a key teacher or administrator on campus. They remember the teachers that were hard, that challenged them. These are the people that are still fresh in their memories even after forty or more years.

Second, each person's story is different. Every school, every institution is a complex one where student interactions come in a variety of different venues. Alumni memories tend to focus on what they were most involved in. Other things fade over the years, but if you were a student athlete, if you were a member of a Greek fraternity or Sorority, if you were part of an active group such as the hiking club, or an arts group, these memories stay fresh with you.

Finally, the graduates all have certain memories that stand out. If you were a female, and lived on campus, your memories of dorm life, the restrictions on women and rules that governed your life are still fresh. If you were involved in the campus social life then certain activities stayed with you: Snow Carnival Ice Sculptures, Mums for your date that you bought from the mum girls, The Chain Gang and Freshman initiation, registering for classes in the old men's gym and gathering punch cards from the professors, all of these memories and many more were all part of the social fabric of growing up and living at Arizona State College and Northern Arizona University and even forty years of living doesn't diminish the impact that these memories made on each individual's life.

Forty years after graduation, most of your graduates are nearing retirement and facing more of the end-of-life issues. Your goal as a dean, department chair or alumni director is to keep those wonderful memories of campus life fresh in their minds. That way, as the alumni make decisions about their gift giving and their priorities for giving back to the campus, they will be freshly reminded of the campus and time period that provided them with that wonderful few years of becoming part of the alumni of your campus.

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### Web Sites of Interest

- [www.doingoralhistory.org/](http://www.doingoralhistory.org/)
- [www.nau.edu/library/speccoll/index.html](http://www.nau.edu/library/speccoll/index.html)
- [www.Southwestoralhistory.org](http://www.Southwestoralhistory.org)
- [www.ascnauoralhistoryproject.pbwiki.com](http://www.ascnauoralhistoryproject.pbwiki.com)

## 7.1 APPENDIX A

### Questions for Oral History Project

Directions: Remember Oral History consists of participants telling their story. Your task is to guide that telling, not direct it. Please consider these as guiding questions and allow participants to tell their story themselves. Your role is to prompt them with the questions involved.

#### Questions About Demographics

1. What is your name? What degree did you receive, in what year, and from what department?
2. What role have you had in education following graduation? What positions have you held in education?
3. What was the physical campus like during that time period, what were Flagstaff and Northern Arizona, and other social outlets like during that time period?
4. How would you describe the student population in terms of age, gender, race, economic status?

#### Questions About College Experience

1. Why did you choose to go to A.S.C./N.A.U? How did ASC/NAU influence your decision to go into education?
2. How did you pay for your college experience and did you work during the time you were a student? What jobs did you hold?
3. What was your experience with housing during this time? Were you in a dormitory or off campus? What was dorm life like?
4. What campus traditions were memorable to you during this time?
5. What Extra Curricular activities did you take part in (sports, drama, government, newspaper, etc) and what effect did they have on your college experience.
6. What teachers, classes or educational experiences did you have that were the most memorable?
7. What faculty, staff or administrators were the most memorable to you?

#### Impact of College Experience

1. What was your clearest and most memorable experience of your college years?
2. Considering your total college experience, what difference did ASC/NAU make in your later professional life?
3. What connections did your college experience provide you with? (Friends, business, professional)
4. Considering your total college experience, what difference did ASC/NAU make in your personal life?
5. What about your college experience most made you feel good about yourself?
6. What were the pressing social issues of the day and how did that affect your life on campus?

#### Open Ended Question

1. Is there anything that we did not ask that you would like to share?